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EXTENDED REVIEW

Mark Connolly

Since the 1990s it has become virtually axiomatic that Britain's economic competitiveness depends on its development of a knowledge-based economy (KBE). This turn to knowledge as the country's primary resource was, essentially, a reaction to the vicissitudes of globalization, where traditional manufacturing jobs migrated to countries with lower labour costs. Consequently, according to the KBE thesis, Britain's economic success depends on fostering and developing innovative goods and services that would be produced by the celebrated, highly skilled 'knowledge worker'. The key to this move to a knowledge-rich economy was seen to be education: individuals need to acquire knowledge and skills that will, purportedly, create an economy based on innovative knowledge in goods and services.

Who could dissent against this ostensibly benign policy imperative, offering as it does increased opportunities for learning and knowledge development?

The author of *Economy, Work and Education*, Catherine Casey, is certainly a dissenting voice, arguing that this policy, far from being benign, has, instead, malignant social and cultural outcomes in both the spheres of education and work. Not only does Casey offer a rousing rejoinder to this hegemonic policy framework, but she claims that it is within its ostensible benevolence that its ideological power rests. Casey argues with both authority and conviction that the type of education promoted within the KBE thesis – or certainly its policy application – simply serves a neo-liberal economic agenda that subordinates both the spheres of education and work to being the handmaiden of the economy.

To realize the ambitious goal of linking the fields of economy, work and education, Casey draws upon a classically informed sociological perspective – which she describes as a 'sociological vantage point' – that allows her to survey economic, academic and policy fields in relation to the KBE within a neo-liberal policy framework. In justifying this approach she reiterates and expands previous criticism of contemporary social science (for an early example, see Casey 1995), which she implicates in creating a de-politicized public arena in which economists and business leaders assert the hegemony

of neo-liberalism: these weaknesses include sociology's turn to culture; a neglect of analysis of organizations and economic institutions; the noncumulative study of fashionable though ephemeral phenomena; disciplinary insularity; and an obsession with quantification. The cumulative effect of these factors has been an emasculation of critical social science, resulting in social analysts becoming 'policy takers grumbling among themselves on the sidelines of an economically dominated social sphere' (4). To illustrate her arguments Casey draws upon empirical examples (primarily drawn from European Commission reports, most especially the Lisbon Agenda), which shows a sensitivity to text and context celebrated in strands of critical discourse analysis (although she does not directly cite them, many of the discursive constructions she considers – flexibility, employability – form part of the 'new planetary vulgate' outlined by Bourdieu and Wacquant [2001] in their seminal essay on 'neoliberal newspeak').

Chapter One begins by giving a standard account of the impact of information and communications technology revolution theory on conceptions of a new capitalism derived from knowledge and information. Within new capitalism's instrumental reason, it is technological and scientific knowledge that are heralded as being the future driver of the economy. A consequence of this is the reduction of knowledge and learning to a techno-scientific rationality which, she claims, delimits the aim of education and learning to the production of economically useful knowledge. Showing sensitivity to the ideological power of language, Casey argues that this politically seductive policy discourse establishes its hegemony through the misappropriation of the socially progressive, humanistic orientations of the 'learning society' that are then mutated to serve an instrumental economic agenda: as she comments, it is hard to argue for 'low skills' (21). However, empirical studies indicate that many of the new jobs being created do not require high levels of education or skills; despite this, within policy discourse, one's inability to secure such a job (or a job at all) is the result of a skills dearth on the part of the individual.

When the author then asks, as a prelude to her consideration of the impact of the KBE on the sphere of work, whether or not we can speak of the knowledge economy as anything more than a 'useful catch-phrase to encourage a popular conformity to the imperatives and demands of contemporary,

liberally regulated, highly marketized economic activity?' (32), the reader has more than an inkling that the answer might be 'no'. To justify reducing the KBE thesis to such a catchphrase, Casey illustrates how human capital theory, where knowledge and skills are viewed as a key worker resource, inform both KBE and the reconstruction of the 'worker' as 'employee' under the pernicious auspices of Human Resource Management (she reserves some of her most strident criticisms for Human Resource Management, which was initially conceived – and positively received – in terms of recognizing the value of labour as a resource, but which, she claims, is in effect a managerialist technology). The high-skills model in which such managerialist approaches flourish is identified as an 'Anglo-Saxon model', which Casey contrasts with a 'classical economy model' of high skills. This latter model, which she locates in a British context in the work of Crouch, Finegold, and Sako (1999) and Brown (2001), encompasses both a humanistic approach to human development and an economic objective: it posits education as both personally, socially and economically advantageous. However, it is the Anglo Saxon model that Casey argues is predominant within OECD countries. A key discourse she identifies within this model is that of 'continual innovation', both in relation to the firm and the worker: this resulted in the idea of the 'learning organization' where the ability to learn and share knowledge forms an essential part of an organization's 'social capital'. The types of learning required within such an organization involve both the utilization and refinement of productive knowledge and the identification and elimination of non-productive knowledge. This, according to Casey, has given rise to systems of knowledge management whereby tacit productive knowledge is identified, codified and shared. The benign outcomes of these practices are opportunities for the generation and sharing of knowledge that optimize skill levels and lead to the production of higher value goods and, in some cases, as the author illustrates in her previous work (Casey 2004), opportunities for collaborative work practices. However, the model that predominates and is celebrated in business literature is a technocratic conception of knowledge that 'effects a subordination, neutralization and assimilation of cultural aspirations for education' (56). Chapter Three, 'Work Now: The Forces of Production', explores how features of 'unleashed' capitalism have impacted upon the world of work. Using

Weber's rationalization thesis, Casey argues that, due to advances in technology that have facilitated an expansion in production, combined with increased competitive demands, we are experiencing a period of hyper neorationalization. In addition to the standard imperative to reduce costs, within 'a neo-rational' programme a firm's rationalization depends on its ability to innovate and develop new forms of organization. These new 'postbureaucratic' organizational structures draw upon discourses of 'flexibility' in contrast to the vertical, unyielding and highly bureaucratic organizations within a Taylor–Fordist model: encapsulated within Peter's (1989) aphorism 'thriving in chaos'. While acknowledging classical accounts of the impact of technology on economic development and organizational restructuring, Casey cautions against the wholesale adoption of Castell's (1996) argument in relation to the impact information technology has had in restructuring the relationship between capital and labour towards a network: in addition to developing flexible, less hierarchical, networked models, the firm concretizes both vertical and horizontal integration and adopts refined and more insidious methods of control. A key element within the reassertion of vertical integration is 'the management of knowledge' (67). A corollary of such knowledge management is the requirement for workers to display flexibility, not only in terms of personal characteristics as a prerequisite of employment, but, as human resources, to be willing to adapt and adhere to the culture of the organization. The enculturation of employees is performed under the aegis of Human Resource Management, whose ideological power rests on its utilization of a human relations' perspective and its concerns for worker well-being; its function, however, is to intensify rationalization and to promote and protect the interests of the firm or, as the author argues, 'sanitized worker domination' (80). Part of the move to the construction of the worker as employee within Human Resource Management is the focus on workers' psychological profile as well as their ability and skills to do a job. Casey identifies this as part of a wider individualization of workers resulting in stronger managerial control and a weakening of collective worker identities and collective organizations.

In Chapter Four Casey moves from work to the sphere of education, which, she claims, is undergoing a similar subjugation to economic rationalization; or as she describes it, in one of her many rhetorical flourishes,

‘economic incursion with colonialist intent’ (86). This rationalization takes two forms: the reduction of education to skills training and the production of techno-scientific skills and knowledge; and the rationalization of education in line with what she has previously identified as the ‘scientific episteme’ within neo-liberalism. She begins by outlining the expansion of education as part of a progressive policy formulation grounded in humanistic conceptions of the individual and social benefits of learning: this found its expression within policy discourses in the idea of ‘lifelong learning’ and a ‘learning society’. However, the egalitarian and humanistic underpinnings of this model have been usurped by a narrow instrumentalism that views learning as merely skills acquisition. Drawing on her previous explication of the impacts of human capital theory within the sphere of work, Casey claims that the consequence of economic reductionism on education is two-fold: the first is the move to mass skills generation within the KBE; the second is the revised role of the university. These two imperatives resulted in a virtual elision of education and employment policy, and the rationalization of the function of education; this was particularly acute in relation to the institution of the university, which has seen a ‘surrender to corporate authority’ that Casey argues has taken place ‘with barely a whimper in the quad’ (104). The impact on university structure and organization that Casey describes has been well documented and debated within academia: the privileging of management; the entrepreneurial imperative; the ‘tyranny’ of performance and accountability; the demise of liberal and fine arts rooted as they are in a seemingly anachronistic and obsolete humanist episteme.

The focus of Chapter Five moves away from education and back to the sphere of work, interrogating the organizational behaviour of the firm and illustrating how this impacts upon the uses, misuses and limits of knowledge. While she does acknowledge some qualified successes of the KBE, Casey argues that not only are the types of knowledge-rich, high-skilled jobs unevenly distributed throughout the general economy, but that, within the celebrated knowledge-intensive industries themselves, there has been greater polarization. This increased labour market bifurcation at a wider economic level is evidenced by the expansion of low paid and low skilled and poorly protected jobs, primarily within a burgeoning service sector. In addition to

the expansion of 'neo-Taylorized' jobs within the wider economy, there has been a polarization of knowledge-rich and knowledge-poor jobs within paradigmatic knowledge-based industries themselves. Her arguments in relation to stratification within knowledge-rich organizations offers a counterpoint to the theses of Stiglitz (1999) and Reich (1991) who claimed that the rise of the knowledge worker within the KBE would result in the flattening of Taylorist organizational hierarchies in favour of more fluid network-based organizational structures. Casey argues that not only is this not the case, but the maintenance of hierarchies within this sector makes rational economic sense: while some might argue that this is the result of organizational inefficiencies, Casey illustrates how the uneven distribution and utilization of knowledge and skills is a highly rational organizational strategy that bifurcates knowledge-rich and knowledge-poor work to rationalize the most efficient utilization of skills and knowledge. Such strategic retention of knowledge hierarchies allows the firm to both create vertically integrated, flexible networks within teams designated as innovative and knowledge generating, while, simultaneously, intensifying Taylorist routinization and rigidity for medium-skilled or low-skilled production workers. Increasingly within this latter category one finds highly educated and skilled workers recruited as a contingency in case their skills and knowledge could be used in the future. Such non-alignment of skills and job, or as Brown and Hesketh (2004) term it 'mismanagement of talent', results in both a relentless skills inflation and workplace congestion that militates against the effective utilization of workers' skills, knowledge and talent.

Chapter Six of the book attempts to draw the fields of education and work together and identify some all-encompassing themes with regards to rationalization of these areas within a neo-liberal economic model. One of the malign consequences Casey identifies with the wider instrumentalization of knowledge is the decline in democratic participation both at a national and at a firm level. At the level of the firm the combined forces of an intensification of managerial power and the weakening of workers' collective and individual voice has resulted in an increasingly undemocratic workplace. This type of worker disempowerment and disenfranchisement occurs in knowledge-intensive areas as well as areas of work that have been associated with a more Fordist–Taylorist model; Casey is keen to highlight the

paradox of a drive to increased flexibility in organizational structures while, at the same time, the exclusion of workers from collective and individual decision-making has resulted in an exponential increase in bureaucratic structures. A second overarching theme Casey identifies as a consequence of the celebration of high-skilled, knowledge-rich jobs is the pervasive derogation of what she deems 'ordinary work'. She argues that the imperative to upskill in order to avail of the new knowledge-rich work on offer has resulted in the disparagement of culturally devalued jobs with low economic but high social value: as a consequence, rather than finding ways to ameliorate conditions within such work, the focus and onus is on the worker to develop the knowledge that will facilitate his/her 'escape'. This cultural devaluing of aspects of work is paralleled by the cultural devaluing of education, where the wider socio-cultural function of the university is usurped by a crude instrumentalism that sees a university's function as that of servicing the job market. In line with this knowledge commodification, universities have been organizationally rationalized to deliver this commodity in the most efficient manner: modular degrees that militate against the accumulation of knowledge; the representation of the teacher/student relationship in commercial terms that work against the development of meaningful pedagogical relationships; the cleaving of research from teaching and the increasing bifurcation of these functions. The cumulative effect of this rationalization of the university has been profound: a general lowering of standards; the neglect of subjects that are not rooted in the scientific episteme and do not offer economically useful knowledge; and the enervation of the wider social and cultural functions of the university encapsulated in the concept of 'Bildung'. The reduction of education to 'a strategic arm of macroeconomic policy' (160) is matched by a revised conception of its social function. This forms part of a wider reconceptualization of social policy away from traditional structural concerns of social justice – redistribution, equality of opportunity – to one focused on the individual. The discourse of 'employability' illustrates this: rather than a structural focus on job creation, policy is orientated towards the individual's ability to gain employment, resulting in blame and often pathologization of the individual for not achieving the requisite skills and knowledge to work. Within this discourse the terms work and unemployment are often replaced by 'social

inclusion’/‘social exclusion’ where citizenship is reduced to economic activity.

Within this policy framework, education becomes a surrogate economic and social policy.

In the final chapter Casey offers the concept of social citizenship as a bulwark against the economic reductionism of a business rationality that excludes any form of social or public interest. A fundamental premise within this is a restoration of the social rather than economic foundations of the concept of citizenship. Within this reconceptualization of citizenship, Casey rejects classic political definitions of the citizen based on the nation-state, arguing that within a global society a transnational social definition is needed. Within this conception citizenship is not conferred on the individual but instead is formed within ‘worksites of citizenship’: key sites for this renewal of a social citizenship are education (primarily the university) and work. Casey is keen to distance her model of social citizenship from both a managerial model of ‘organization citizenship’ and models offered within European Commission policy discourses: the former appropriates concepts of duty implicit within the classical ideas of citizen and state reciprocity; while the latter delimits the function of citizenship to economic participation. The model of citizenship she postulates within both the spheres of education and work embraces ideas of social citizenship that would facilitate the development of a rearticulation of the social and cultural functions of education and learning.

It is somewhat portentous that Casey refers to this book as a ‘project’, and she would, in no doubt, embrace Colin Crouch’s introduction, describing her as ‘a brave soul’, questioning the hegemony of the KBE; while this conviction makes for a forceful argument, her broadsides, at times, veer into the polemical. Although there is much to admire in the book’s impassioned critique of the turn to learning as a panacea within economic and social policy, its claims are at times overblown and compromised by inflated rhetoric and weak justification, either in empirical data or detailed argument: there is no distinction made between education, credentials and skills; education, lifelong learning and the institution of the university are at times interchangeable; and while she claims to be describing education across OECD countries, the features of the university she describes are particularly British – indeed British post-1992 institutions, by her own admission. The

use of European Union and European Commission documents do not justify the grand claims she makes – these policies are, of course, interpreted and challenged at various national and local levels – and her justification for an empirical focus on the European Union ‘because of its excellent and prominent policy-making institutions and its highly visible pronouncement of its pursuit of the knowledge-based economy’ (5) is particularly unconvincing. In addition, Casey’s denial of agency or resistance to the individual will infuriate many readers: this is particularly striking in her representation of workers’ passive consumption as a result of the ‘coercive marketing powers’ of the firm (81) and the representation of academics unquestioningly accepting the rationalization of the university. This, however, is not a criticism of the classic sociological approach taken by the author, as she does succeed in exposing ideological power within manifestations of learning within the KBE and in the structure of education and work organizations. Finally, the book needed tighter proofreading and editing to eliminate some unwieldy and convoluted syntax, as well as a number of typographical errors: ‘ ...

social relations.

neo-liberalism’s’ (15); ‘new forms of rationalizations’ (75); ‘form them’ (92); ‘thus conducted shift’ (101); and ‘as has long has been observed’ (123).

Having recognized these shortcomings there is much to admire in this provocative work and I certainly recommend it as a valuable contribution to debates about contemporary policy articulations of KBE. While the highly ambitious attempt to link the spheres of education and work may not have been entirely successful, *Economy, Work and Education* should realize its aim of stimulating and provoking cross-disciplinary debate in relation to the social outcomes of contemporary policy endorsement of the KBE thesis. If the KBE is to be represented as a nostrum for European economic and social problems, then Casey’s ‘project’ is a welcome fly in that celebrated policy ointment.

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